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"As the door opened the trumpets, King and Louis, one or both, soared above everything else. The whole joint was rocking. Tables, chairs, walls, people, moved with the rhythm. It was dark, smoky, gin-smelling. People in the balcony leaned over and their drinks spilled on the customers below....Oliver and Louis would roll on and on, piling up the choruses, with the rhythm section building the beat until the whole thing got inside your head and blew your brains out.”

—Eddie Condon, jazz musician and band leader

More Than Just Sound

I was twelve years old when the First World War ended. My parents told me that it was the worst thing to ever happen to mankind, and that we as Americans would have to be especially careful to never let it happen again. They worried a lot about my future and worked hard to make sure that I excelled in school and stayed out of trouble. I was their only son, so a lot was at stake for them.

The decade following World War I would be remembered as the “Roaring Twenties” and the “Golden Twenties.” (It was also called the “Jazz Age,” but I’ll get to that in a moment.) I have often asked myself why this decade in American history was so different from any other. Maybe it was because the nation’s wealth doubled between 1920 and 1929, or because it was during this decade that, for the first time, more Americans lived in urban areas than in rural areas. But I think that it was really the *youth* of America who made this such a memorable decade and transformed the culture of our nation.

Perhaps the younger generation mistrusted the older generation after the horrors of World War I. Young people wanted change, and everything seemed to be changing – music, fashion, and dancing. I remember my mother constantly telling my sister and me, “Look at all these flappers nonchalantly doing what they please! Their hair is so short that you can barely see it, and their clothes are so skimpy that it looks like they are wearing swimsuits in public – they should be arrested!” And, indeed, some of these women *were* arrested for their so-called indecent exposure. I remember laughing at the “Anti-Flirt League” that was formed by worried mothers to protest against the acts of their rebellious daughters – laughing to myself, at least, as my mother was an active member.

The fashions of young women were not the only factor that the older generation blamed for the destruction of the present generation; linked to the new type of young American was the growth of a new type of music, too: jazz. Before I knew about jazz music, I was a huge lover of ragtime music and a decent-enough pianist that I could learn from some of the new sheet music that was coming out from ragtime greats like Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton. In some ways, ragtime was the predecessor of jazz, but what I came to learn is that jazz is more of a *way* of performing than a particular repertoire of music. It was born out of a blend of the different styles of folk music, popular music, and light classical music that were being created just before 1900, but saying that it is simply a blend of different styles of music would be completely inaccurate. As a young man during the Roaring Twenties, I initially knew very little about the music that would become such an important part of my life, and it was only when I met Louis Armstrong that I truly discovered what it meant to play jazz.

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“Come see King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band perform at Lincoln Gardens in Chicago this Friday night!” the flyer read. I had never actually gone to a jazz band performance, even though I had lived in Chicago, one of the centers of the jazz world during the 1920s, for all of my life. As with many things, my parents, particularly my mother, were against the idea of me exposing myself to this new, dangerous form of music.

“That ragtime you play is bad enough, Lawrence,” my mother would often chastise me. “I can barely stand its unbalanced, suggestive rhythms. But this ‘jazz’ that you’re interested in, based on the awful rumors I’ve heard, is not music at all. My friends tell me that it is simply cacophony, a way of irritating the nerves and encouraging physical passion. I won’t stand for it in this household!” And that was that, as far as she was concerned.

But there was something about this flyer that piqued my interest. I knew that Lincoln Gardens was the hottest spot in town for jazz, and I had heard from some kids at my high school that Joe “King” Oliver’s jazz band was particularly good. If they were willing to secretly attend a jazz concert, why shouldn’t I? So I decided to give it a shot and ask one of my friends to join me in attending the concert. John’s reaction was not what I expected.

“Are you out of your mind?” he exclaimed.

“What do you mean? What’s wrong with going to a jazz concert?” I replied.

John slapped his hand to his face and sighed. “Jazz is for nig–”

“Come on, don’t say that word,” I interrupted. I always hated the sound of it.

“Fine, jazz is for *Negroes*, Lawrence,” he reluctantly corrected himself. “They are the only ones playing it, because they’re the ones who invented it down south in New Orleans. Their music is their business.”

“How does that make any sense?” I retorted. John was usually a reasonable person, but right now he was being really irrational. “Shouldn’t music be something that *everyone* can enjoy?”

John sighed again. “The government says that the whites and the Negroes should be separate but equal, and I agree. It’s too dangerous for the two races to be around each other. It’s best if we just stay away from them and live our own, separate lives.”

“Do you think it’s too dangerous for us to go to a jazz concert, or are we just too scared to try?”

A long pause. Then John said, “I don’t know, Lawrence. You can go to that jazz performance if you like, but I’m not going to risk my safety like that.”

I was irritated, but perhaps John was right. Maybe going to a Negro jazz concert would only lead to trouble. But a strong sense of curiosity compelled me to go in spite of his warnings, and the following night, I took my first step into the world of “the devil’s music.”

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The thing I remember most about Lincoln Gardens is the lively bright colors that filled the dancehall. The colors, the music, and the overall atmosphere created in that building brought a kind of energy that I had never experienced before. In those days, it was uncommon for whites to attend such jazz concerts, and sure enough, I was the only white person in sight.

The bouncer told me with a wry smile, “I see you’re here for your music lesson tonight.”

I wasn’t exactly sure how to take that comment. I knew that I wasn’t the only interested white kid who would attend this type of concert; perhaps the bouncer was suggesting that the “superior” whites had a lot to learn from the gifted Negro musicians. Whatever the case, I knew that entering that dancehall would be tantamount to entering into a different world – one in which *I* was the outsider.

Upon entering the hall, I noticed a large crystal ball made of small pieces of reflecting glass that hung over the middle of the dance floor. I was definitely not planning to dance, but it was marvelous to see the spotlights shining on the crystal ball as it turned and sprinkled dots of light all over the venue. There was chicken wire stretched out along the ceiling, and hanging from it were huge bunches of artificial maple leaves.

But I hadn’t come for any of this. Frankly, after receiving curious looks from some of the other dancers at the dancehall, I was starting to wish that I hadn’t come at all. To play it safe, I stood near the entrance of the building, making every effort to remain unnoticed. I knew that if this style of music didn’t blow me away, I wouldn’t be coming back for more.

“Will you please join me in welcoming King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band!” the announcer shouted.

Onto the stage appeared an energetic jazz band of nine. I was already surprised. I had never seen such a lively, cheerful-looking ensemble. But it was only when second cornet player Louis Armstrong played his solo that my hesitations about the world of jazz disappeared. Armstrong was initially unwilling to play in the spotlight, probably because he wanted to let his band leader and idol Oliver have all of the attention. But the crowd could tell that Louie had an unusual, God-given talent, and when they sensed that he was holding back, an older man yelled: “Let the youngster blow!” And that was when Louie played the blues.

Eighteen high Cs in a row. I couldn’t believe it. Who could play the same note over and over again without it becoming boring? To avoid monotony, Louie played each high C with a slightly different accentuation. Some Cs were blistering-hot, while others were barely noticeable. Some were super short and staccato, whereas others were long and drawn out. Then, once the audience decided that it was content with just one note being played for the entire solo, Louie expertly transitioned into other notes, each one embracing the next, each one with a unique purpose. By the time the solo was over, the entire audience was screaming. I was so happy that I almost cried.

Where on earth had this music come from?

“Lawrence, come here this instant!”

My father.

Of course my mother hadn’t bought my excuse of an extra church choir practice that Friday night. She had guessed that I would go to this jazz concert, and of course she had sent my father to fetch his sixteen-year-old son from the concert like he was a small, runaway child.

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You can imagine what the conversation with my parents was like. Everyone has heard phrases from their parents along the lines of, “Even though we *explicitly* told you not to…” and “Now you’ve betrayed our trust….” But I honestly felt no regret for attending the concert – I was just frustrated with my parents’ lack of trust in my own decision-making abilities. How could they be so unreasonable? If my father had stayed long enough to actually *listen* to the music, maybe he would have understood my desire to stay.

On the other hand, perhaps I was the one being unreasonable. After all, I had disobeyed my parents and made myself conspicuous at an almost entirely Negro event. Was that really a good idea?

Maybe it wasn’t even my parents that were frustrating me, but rather the fact that a white teenager couldn’t attend a jazz concert without being an outsider and possibly endangering himself. I just didn’t understand the division between the races. In my mind, a musician as talented and inspiring as Louis Armstrong couldn’t be less than human. But I was ahead of my time, and it infuriated me that not everyone could see things the way I did.

So what was I supposed to do? Disobey my parents again, or never go to another jazz concert? As it turned out, I had to wait until I was out of the house before I was able to see Louis Armstrong again. But this time, my interaction with the great jazzer was far more extensive and life-changing.

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1929: I was twenty-three years old. I had just finished my undergraduate studies at New York University, and I was an aspiring lawyer. But my passion for jazz music had never waned since my first jazz concert. I loved the freedom that college brought, because I finally wasn’t monitored every hour of the day by my concerned mother. But it wasn’t that I didn’t love her or my father – my parents were good people and I knew they loved me. Right before I had left for college, my normally undemonstrative mother had tears in her eyes as she hugged me and said, “I wish you weren’t going so far away, Lawrence. I’ve heard such alarming things about those fast New York flappers! Promise me you won’t let yourself be led into temptation with all the casual dating that is tragically rampant among you young people, and please don’t ever distract yourself from what’s most important.”

How could I remain angry at her? As strict as she was, I loved my mother for always watching out for me – I came to feel that her scrupulous monitoring of me was just her way of expressing her love.

But there was something she had said that bothered me for the next few years: “please don’t ever distract yourself from what’s most important.” Because I knew what she really meant was, “Stay away from any more jazz clubs.”

Her request wasn’t completely unreasonable. As a motivated college student, I had very little free time, because studying became my life. I loved what I was learning, anyway, and I realized that I would be able to use my law degree for tremendous good if I became a lawyer who was fair and not biased by the color of people’s skin. And, to be honest, I was also a little scared that the New York jazz clubs might be the violent and unwelcoming places that my mother swore they were. But as I lay in bed at night, I sometimes asked myself: *Is it healthy to spend virtually all of my time studying? Is it reasonable to let go of jazz music, which I enjoyed so much at my first concert? Am I afraid to play a type of music that I might not be good at because I’m white?*

I knew that it wasn’t just the music that my parents were against – it was also the people who were playing it. My parents never explicitly said that Negroes were inferior to whites, and I think in many ways they felt guilty about the unjust treatment that the Negroes received. But instead of acting on this uneasiness, they decided it was best to stay to themselves and let the issue resolve itself. Just as my friend John had advised.

But I am a firm believer that if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem. Times were changing. I was part of an entirely new generation of Americans. And I eventually realized that I had to make a choice: I could either be cautious and “moral” like my parents, or I could take action and be a part of a society on the move.

I was at a turning point in my life, and I needed a sign to show me what to do next. As fate would have it, New York turned out to be the perfect place for me to be in 1929.

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It was a sweltering June night. Even though the sun was down, I could feel its burning influence on the Big Apple. This was a night to be excited.

I couldn’t believe it when I found out the news: Louis Armstrong would be performing on Broadway for the first time.

His performance was called *Hot Chocolates*. Even though this was a jazz concert, I didn’t feel guilty about attending a show on Broadway, where only the highest caliber of music would be played and where the audience would be white. I didn’t think my parents would have objected.

Fortunately, I had thought to buy a ticket for myself plenty of time in advance, because the theater was packed. I had a good seat, too, near the front of the stage.

The lights dimmed. The curtain opened. The announcer introduced the performance. Applause.

My heart raced.

And then he came out. Louis Armstrong, the greatest cornet player I had ever heard, appeared on the stage with some other jazz musicians. Instead of playing the cornet, he was now playing the trumpet, which was becoming a more common instrument for jazz musicians and had a more belting sound.

Many fantastic songs were performed that night, but there is one that sticks in my mind as truly groundbreaking: *Ain’t Misbehavin’*.

Until that point, jazz music was distinctly separate from the pop music of the 1920s. The two styles had nothing to do with each other. But Louis Armstrong forever changed that.

*Ain’t Misbehavin’* was just a typical pop song. Armstrong’s stroke of insight was to use that pop song as material for his own jazzy interpretation. Not only did the song sound great in the style of jazz, it helped blur the line between pop music and jazz music and set the stage for the popular acceptance of jazz that would follow during the next few decades. Largely thanks to Armstrong, America’s popular music *became* jazz music, changing the popular culture of America for many years.

And boy did he play the piece well.

Armstrong’s confidence had greatly increased, and his soloing had become even more bold and eloquent. I could tell that with every year of experience he would become an even more masterful musician and performer. He was blossoming like nobody’s business.

After the concert, I mustered the courage to meet Armstrong backstage. Fortunately, the security guard was flirting with a pretty woman, and I seized my opportunity to finally meet the jazz master in person. I was thrilled.

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He was not a tall man by any means, no more than five-and-a-half feet in height, but his personality was so big that he seemed at least six feet tall to me. I timidly walked up to him.

“Excuse me, Mr. Armstrong, my name is Lawrence Williams, and I am a big fan of yours.”

Louis shook my hand. He had a very firm grip. “Nice to meet ya’, Lawrence!”

Whoa.

I had never heard Louis speak before, and I had no idea how rough and gravelly his voice would be. It was practically an octave deeper than mine! I was caught off guard by how unusual his voice was, but fortunately his smile was so huge and he was so friendly that I wasn’t hesitant or afraid to talk to him.

I told him, “I went to a performance of King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band several years ago, and it was your solo that made me fall in love with jazz.”

Louis became excited. “Hey, you got to see my Papa Joe! I love him ‘cause, after all, he’s my idol, and he did mo’ for the young musicians in my area than *anyone* that I know of. All my old band friends love Joe Oliver, and he’ll always be remembered for his five part harmonies and his chillin’ cornet sound variations.” I had no idea what a close relationship Armstrong had with Oliver. Clearly, Oliver had influenced his playing to a great extent.

I asked, “Mr. Armstrong, how are you so confident playing on such an important stage? I know I would be scared out of my mind!”

“Well, Mr. Williams, as a younger fella’ I used to be very afraid to perform for different people. I was born ’n raised in New Orleans, and when I first came to Chicago to perform with my Papa Joe’s band, I had no idea where I was. I’d never seen a city that big. All those tall buildings. I thought they were universities!” He let out his hoarse, gravely laugh. It was so infectious that I couldn’t help but laugh, too.

It was so interesting to talk to Louis in person. The way he slurred his words together was much like the way he slurred notes on his trumpet. I’ll admit that I didn’t understand everything that he said, because he almost talked as if he were singing.

At that point, I decided to ask Louis a specifically musical question: how would he define jazz?

His answer was perfect: “If you have to ask what jazz is, you’ll never know. What we play is life, and jazz is a music that is played from the heart. You can even live by it. Always love it.”

Beautiful.

It was then that I realized that I didn’t care that Louis Armstrong’s skin was black. I had so much respect for him as a musician and as a person that his race made no difference to me. He was my role model.

“However,” he continued, “I want you to remember that there’s two types of music: good and bad. The type I play is good.” We both laughed. “If you wanna become a good jazzer, ya’ need to rememba’ that jazz is a variety of all good music, and you gotta practice it every day. You dig?”

I replied, somewhat awkwardly, “I dig.”

He smiled. “That’s the spirit, Daddy! You’ve got what it takes to be a real jazz player and a dang cool cat.”

I laughed. “What’s a cat?”

Louis said, “A cat can be anybody, from the guy in the gutter, to a lawyer, doctor, the biggest man or the Lord’s man, but if he’s in there with a good heart and enjoying the same music together, he’s a cat, Daddy.”

As funny and charming as Louis was, I could tell that he was also insightful and ahead of his time. He realized that it doesn’t matter who plays jazz music – as long as you have a good heart and are enjoying the music along with everyone else, you’re a “cat,” as Louis put it. I guess the world needed more cats like Louis Armstrong.

I asked him if he would mind showing me a few things about jazz to get started. He gave me some invaluable advice. “Start with the blues,” he said. “That’s where jazz started, and it’s an art form that comes from the soul.” He played a blues riff for me on his trumpet. I was devastated that no one was there to record it.

He told me that I would have to practice consistently if I wanted to get better and keep up my skills. “If I don’t practice for a day, I know it. If I don’t practice for two days, the critics know it. And if I don’t practice for three days, the public knows it. Keep that in mind when you want to perform for others.”

But what struck me the most was Louis’ perspective on how music should be related to the way a person lives. “What we play is life,” he had said.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but that one interaction with Louis Armstrong would change the course of my life.

My mother had told me not to distract myself with anything that was not as important as my studies. But what Louis was telling me was that the music we play as musicians *is* our very life – not a distraction, not a hobby, but an essential part of our existence.

It was then that I understood that I would have to go against my parents’ wishes to be true to myself.

They certainly weren’t thrilled when they found out I was pursuing jazz piano. I remember many a letter from my mother plaintively asking why I was wasting my time with an art form that would lead me down the devil’s path. I knew that she would probably never change, but I learned to let go of that and to live my life by following my own moral compass. I didn’t want my music to be a source of conflict and argument, and I realized that it was best to simply change the subject when it came up with my mother.

Since that Broadway performance, I’ve been practicing jazz music every day. I’m certainly no Armstrong, but I’m trying to introduce some of my white friends to the excitement and beauty of jazz. Jazz piano has become my greatest passion, and I spend a tremendous amount of my free time on it. I am forever grateful to the man who got me started me on this journey and who changed my outlook on the role I have in this rapidly changing nation as a musician.

What we play is life.

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Attribution of Research

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* Jazz is more of a way of performing music than a particular repertoire of music
* Jazz was born out of a blend of the different styles of folk, popular, and light classical music that were being created just before 1900

2. “JAZZ A Film By Ken Burns: Biographies – Louis Armstrong." *PBS*. PBS, n.d. Web.

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* Louis Armstrong’s first Broadway performance was in 1929, and it was called *Hot Chocolates*
* Louis Armstrong’s jazzy rendition of the pop song *Ain’t Misbehavin’* was groundbreaking because it set the stage for the *popular* (not just black) acceptance of jazz in America that would follow in the subsequent decades

3. “JAZZ A Film By Ken Burns: Jazz in Time - Roaring Twenties." *PBS*. PBS, n.d. Web.

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* The United States’ total wealth doubled between 1920 and 1929
* The Roaring Twenties marked the first time that more Americans lived in urban areas than in rural areas
* Ragtime was a predecessor of jazz, and ragtime sheet music was coming out from ragtime greats such as Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton even before jazz became popular
* Many older Americans believed that jazz isn’t music at all; some said it was simply cacophony and a way of “irritating the nerves” and “encouraging physical passion”
* Jazz was sometimes referred to by more conservative Americans as “The Devil’s Music”
* During the Roaring Twenties, it was very uncommon for whites to attend black jazz concerts, but some curious whites began attending the concerts, anyway

4. “The Jazz Age." *The Jazz Age*. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 Feb. 2015.

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* The decade after World War I was remembered as the “Roaring Twenties,” the “Golden Twenties,” and the “Jazz Age”
* The young people of America had much more freedom than ever before, especially the young women
* The young American women were often noticed and chastised for their short new hairstyle and “skimpy” new clothing
* The new young American women were known as “Flappers” for their new, “provocative” sense of fashion
* The “Flappers” were sometimes arrested for their “indecent exposure”
* The “Anti-Flirt League” was formed by worried mothers to protect against the acts of their daughters
* Linked to the growth of a new generation was a growth in jazz music

5. Teachout, Terry. *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*. Boston: Houghton, 2009. Print.

* Quote of jazz musician and band leader Eddie Condon used as epigraph: “As the door opened the trumpets, King and Louis, one or both, soared above everything else. The whole joint was rocking. Tables, chairs, walls, people, moved with the rhythm. It was dark, smoky, gin-smelling. People in the balcony leaned over and their drinks spilled on the customers below....Oliver and Louis would roll on and on, piling up the choruses, with the rhythm section building the beat until the whole thing got inside your head and blew your brains out.”
* In the early 1920s, Lincoln Gardens was the hottest spot in Chicago and a major place of jazz activity
* Joe “King” Oliver’s jazz band was one of the most prominent bands that played at Lincoln Gardens in the early 1920s
* The Lincoln Gardens dancehall was filled with lots of bright, vibrant colors
* Bouncers at black jazz concerts would often wryly comment when curious white men came, making comments like, “I see you’re here for your music lesson tonight,” as in the case of one white man who went on to become a jazz musician himself
* There was a large crystal ball over the Lincoln Gardens dancehall that was made of small pieces of reflecting glass
* There was chicken wire stretched out along the ceiling in the Lincoln Gardens dancehall, and hanging from the wire were large bunches of artificial maple leaves
* Joe Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band was a band of nine
* Louis Armstrong was the second cornet player in Joe Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band
* Louis Armstrong would often hold back on his playing and let his “Papa Joe” be the star of the band; a person in the audience might notice this, as in one case when a person said, “Let the youngster blow!”
* One of Louis Armstrong’s signature jazz moves was to repeat a high note over and over again, creating interest through varied intonation, volume, etc.
* Louis Armstrong switched from playing the cornet to playing the trumpet (as many jazz musicians were doing) in 1927, and he never turned back
* Louis Armstrong quote about first being in Chicago: “I’d never seen a city that big. All those tall buildings. I thought they were universities!”

6. “Youth and Pop Culture - The Roaring 20s." *Youth and Pop Culture - The Roaring 20s*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2015. <https://sites.google.com/a/uconn.edu/the-roaring-20s/ youth-and-pop-culture>. "Youth and Pop Culture - The Roaring 20s." Youth and Pop Culture - The Roaring 20s. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2015. <https://sites.google.com/a/ uconn.edu/the-roaring-20s/youth-and-pop-culture>.

* Especially after World War I, young Americans were ready to challenge their parents’ ideals and experiment in living their own type of life
* With new inventions (like that of the automobile), “casual dating” became a norm because it was much easier for young Americans to travel independently and date

7. “Louis Armstrong Interview with Edward R. Murrow (1956) from "Satchmo the Great"" Interview by Edward R. Murrow. YouTube. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Mar. 2015. <https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvEE9zdHpcY>.

* Louis Armstrong’s voice was usually gravelly
* Louis Armstrong quote about his “Papa Joe:” “I love him ‘cause, after all, he’s my idol, and he did mo’ for the young musicians in my area than *anyone* that I know of. All my old band friends love Joe Oliver, and he’ll always be remembered…”
* Louis Armstrong would use slang words and phrases like “You dig?”, “Daddy,” and “cat”
* Louis Armstrong quote about what a “cat” is: “A cat can be anybody, from the guy in the gutter, to a lawyer, doctor, the biggest man or the Lord’s man, but if he’s in there with a good heart and enjoying the same music together, he’s a cat, Daddy.”

8. "Louis Armstrong." Jazz Quotes Louis Armstrong Comments. N.p., 18 Mar. 2011. Web. 27 Mar. 2015. <http://jazz-quotes.com/artist/louis-armstrong/>.

* Louis Armstrong quote about knowing what jazz is: “If you have to ask what jazz is, you’ll never know.”
* Louis Armstrong quote about music: “What we play is life.”
* Louis Armstrong quote about jazz coming from the heart: “Jazz is played from the heart. You can even live by it. Always love it.”
* Louis Armstrong quote about the two types of music: “There [are] two types of music: good and bad. The type I play is good.”
* Louis Armstrong quote about the importance of practicing music consistently: “If I don’t practice for a day, I know it. If I don’t practice for two days, the critics know it. And if I don’t practice for three days, the public knows it.”